HORTICULTURE

#20

for the home gardener

County of Los Angeles Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens

Cultivation of Indoor Palms

The Palmae family includes about 3000 species divided among 210 genera. Most of these are from tropical, subtropical and occasionally the warm temperate regions of both hemispheres. Palms are members of the monocot subdivision of plants as are the orchids, lilies and grasses. These seemingly dissimilar plants have many common characteristics, such as fibrous root systems, parallel leaf veins, and the absence of tap roots and cambium layers which place them in the same group. Palms are unusual since they are one of only a few members of the monocots which have attained tree-like proportions. Two groups of palms can be easily recognized by their leaf form. First are the feather palms whose leaf blades are pinnate making them look like large feathers. Second are the fan palms whose leaf blades are palmate or fan-like.

pinnate

palmate

Many of the thousands of palm species are highly suitable for indoor use. They also fare particularly well in containers since they have no tap roots and are tolerant of crowding. They can often be grown in containers which appear quite small in relation to the overall size of the plant.

Areca Palm

Chrysalidocarpus lutescens

Palms can be satisfactorily grown by anyone if a few general guidelines are followed:

SOILS

Palms grow well in a variety of soils. Often, palms grow naturally in heavy soils, but the rule to follow in container culture is to use a soil mixture through which water will pass readily. To a light, porous or sandy soil, humus, peat or leaf mold should be added. Good drainage is essential to permit aeration between waterings. This lets in oxygen that is essential to root development. In some areas (Southern California, for example) where water is alkaline, poor drainage in a potted plant will trap the alkaline salts and the plant will become unhealthy. Brown-tipping of leaves is a common danger signal. Salt accumulation may be visible on the surface of the soil, and may even form a crust. If this occurs replace with fresh soil.

LIGHT

Palms are extremely variable in their need for light. Keep in mind where you are going to grow it and buy accordingly. Many palms are shade tolerant when young, but need more light later in life.

WATER

When a potted palm is given too little water, the small feeder roots will eventually dry up and die. To avoid this, supply water about 2-3 times a week in large enough amounts that all the soil in the container becomes moist. Water should drain freely out the bottom hole. Water requirements may change with the genus, the season, the container and the humidity. Frequency of watering can be reduced if containers of wood, plastic or tin are used instead of porous clay.

Caryota urens

Fishtail Wine Palm

Rhapis excelsa

Broad-leaved Lady Palm

FERTILIZER

Any fertilizer balanced with the essential elements will be suitable. If growing palms in temperate climate zones, stop feeding with the advent of cold weather and resume in the spring with the beginning of the warm months.

REPOTTING

When planting or repotting container palms, firmly compact the soil, then flood with water to settle the soil and eliminate air pockets.

PESTS

Mites, mealy bugs and scale are common pests to potted palms. Brownish or stippled leaves, especially when the weather is hot and dry, may mean your palm has mites. Mites typically live on the underside of the leaves and are very small. If this should occur, contact your nursery for treatment recommendation.

FOLLOWING IS A LIST OF PALMS COMMONLY USED INDOORS AND AVAILABLE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA:

Caryota mitis - 'Clustered Fishtail Palm'

So named because of the shape of its leaflets. A five foot tall specimen usually has deeply arching fronds 3-4 feet long. It does best in pots that seem too small for them, but when they become extremely crowded or the soil is completely filled with roots they should be repotted in early spring using general purpose potting soil. The fish palm grows slowly to an eventual height of 20-25 feet.

Caryota urens - 'Fishtail Wine Palm'

This single stemmed palm will reach 100 feet in its native Asia. Here it will attain 15-20 feet outdoors with some protection. The leaves of this palm are darker than those of C. mitis.

Chamaedorea costaricana

This palm develops fairly fast into bamboo-like clumps of 8-10 foot trunks if well fed and liberally watered. This is a good pot palm which will eventually need a larger container. Its lacy feathery leaves are 3-4 feet long.

Chamaedorea elegans - (Neantha bella) - 'Parlor Palm'

This is the best of the Chamaedoreas for indoor use. This is a dwarf species that when young is commonly used in dish gardens and terrariums because of its ability to live in cramped conditions at that stage. This palm is single stemmed, 3-4 plants are often planted in a single container. It grows very slowly to an eventual height of 3-4 feet. The leaves are pinnate and have 12 pairs or more of slender leaflets.

Chamaedorea ernesti-augusti

This slow growing, single or multi-trunked palm has dark green fishtail shaped leaves and reaches an eventual height of 5 feet. Outdoors it must be grown in the shade in a protected location.

Chamaedorea erumpens - 'Bamboo Palm'

This palm forms clusters and is a bamboo-like dwarf with drooping leaves. It grows slowly to about 4-8 feet. Outdoors it needs a frost free location in shade or part shade.

Chamaedorea geonomiformis

Excellent pot palms that grow slowly to four feet. Their broad oblong leaves are not feathery, but are deeply slit at the tips like a fishtail.

Chamaedorea glaucifolia

A slow growing, but eye catching, palm with a solitary trunk. It grows to an eventual 8 feet. It has finely textured feathery leaves which can reach 4-6 feet long and are bluish-green in color.

Chamaedorea klotzchiana

This palm is native to Mexico, has a solitary trunk and grows slowly to a height of 4-8 feet. Outdoors it is hardy to 28 F. It has handsome dark green, leathery foliage.

Chamaedorea metallica

Similar to C. ernesti-augusti but differs in that its deep green leaves have a metallic sheen. The leaves are often cupped upward toward the tip.

Chamaedorea microspadix

Forms clusters of slender, ringed stems up to 8 feet tall. It has leathery leaves and is one of the hardiest for outdoor use.

Chamaedorea radicalis

A slow growing, single stemmed palm that reaches a height of 4 feet. It has strong patterned dark green leaves and interesting and colorful seed pods. It is the hardiest of the Chamaedoreas, tolerating temperatures down to 22 - 28 F.

Chamaedorea seifrizii

This is a cluster type palm with dense, compact growth up to 8-10 feet. It has feathery leaves with narrow leaflets. It will tolerate temperatures to 28 F. and can be used outdoors in protected areas with part shade.

Chrysalidocarpus lutescens - (Areca lutescens)
'Madagascar Palm' - 'Areca Palm'

In large containers the smooth trunks of this palm will reach a diameter of 2-3 inches and will arch out of the soil to form beautiful multi-trunked, candelabra forms. In small containers the trunks are much more narrow. The Areca palm grows in clumps and bears feather-like, arching fronds composed of many slender light green leaflets. It is susceptible to spider mites and tricky to maintain.

Howea belmoreana - 'Sentry Palm'

One of the best palms for indoor use. It is both beautiful and durable. The leaves are long, feathery and arching. In addition they are dark green and hard finished. They are often planted 3 or 4 to a pot to create a full foliaged effect. Smaller than the Paradise palm.

Howea fosteriana - 'Paradise Palm'

Another excellent choice for an indoor palm. Essentially the leaves are the same as the Sentry palm but while the Sentry palm spreads out the leaves of the Paradise palm form a vase shape. Larger than the Sentry Palm.

Bamboo Palm

Chamaedorea erumpens

Mascarena lagenicaulis - (Hyophorbe lagenicaulis)
'Bottle Palm'

The trunk on this palm eventually becomes swollen, whence its name. Even outside the palm does not become tall, 5 to 10 feet. It has arched feathery leaves.

Neodypsus decaryi

Has graceful feathery leaves arched at their extremities. It is interesting in habit and decidedly ornamental. A mature palm has relatively few leaves but they are big with 40 to 70 leaflets on a feathery leaf.

Phoenix roeblenii - 'Pygmy Date Palm'

This is one of the most durable as well as attractive palms for indoor use. Even when old they seldom exceed 2 feet in height. They have gracefully arching 1-2 foot leaves consisting of many 7-9 inch leaflets. They are often combined with other kinds of plants in dish gardens.

Rhapis excelsa - 'Broad-leaved Lady Palm'

The Rhapis species are tropical in origin and adapt quite well to homes and apartments if humidity can be slightly elevated. The Japanese prize them as potted plants in the juvenile stage at about 4-12 inches tall. When grown in pots they usually do not exceed 3 feet. Leaves of Rhapis excelsa have 3-10 leathery segments.

Rhapis humilis - 'Slender Lady Palm'

Here is a palm that will produce a more desirable compact form in an air conditioned house than in a warmer house. It has slightly thinner stems and deeper green leaves with 9-20 narrow segments. The color is a better green when not exposed to the full sun.

Variegated Rhapis are available but are more susceptible to leaf burn in strong light than the green variety.

3/82

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
DEPARTMENT OF ARBORETA & BOTANIC GARDENS
301 North Baldwin Avenue
Arcadia, CA 91006-2697

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION CAN BE OBTAINED AT:
LOS ANGELES STATE & COUNTY ARBORETUM - (213) 446-8251
DESCANSO GARDENS - (213) 790-5571
SOUTH COAST BOTANIC GARDEN - (213) 377-0468